Pasteurella multocida meningitis in an adult: case report

G R Armstrong, R A Sen, J Wilkinson

Abstract

Pasteurella multocida is known to form part of the normal flora in the nasopharynx or gastrointestinal tract in many domestic and wild animals. Most human P multocida infections are soft tissue infections caused by dog or cat bites. Less commonly this bacterium is associated with infections affecting other organ systems of man. A case of fatal P multocida meningitis discovered at the necropsy of a 52 year old man is described. P multocida is an unusual causative agent of meningitis which tends to affect those at the extremes of age.


Keywords: Pasteurella multocida; meningitis

Pasteurella multocida is a non-spore forming, non-motile, Gram negative coccobacillus. It has been isolated from the respiratory tract and digestive system of domestic pets, livestock, and many wild animals. The carriage rate of the organism is believed to be up to 90% in cats and up to 66% in dogs. P multocida has been known to cause infections in humans, the most familiar being soft tissue infection following animal bites. However, this organism may affect a variety of systems causing serious disease.

Case report

A 52 year old man was found dead at home. No history of illness in the preceding days was available, there is no record of him seeking any medical attention. He had recently been under investigation for dyspepsia but otherwise had no medical history of serious illness. The subject lived with his brother, both reportedly in a state of serious self neglect. Their house was soiled with dog faeces throughout and their pet dog was in poor health.

Pathological examination

The subject was a white male whose appearance was consistent with the stated age of 52 years. He was well nourished and there were no external marks, bites, or scratches. On internal examination a purulent meningitis was found. In particular the cranial vertex and base of brain were affected. A sample of meningeal pus was taken for subsequent culture. The brain was slightly swollen and there was generalised vascular congestion. No skull fractures were present.

The lungs were congested and mildly oedematous. A small thromboembolus was present in the right lower lobe pulmonary artery. There was no evidence of chronic respiratory disease. Mild coronary atherosclerosis and duodenitis were noted. There was no evidence of malignancy, and no other foci of infection were identified. The cause of death was declared to be purulent meningitis.

Bacteriology

Postmortem culture of a swab of meningeal pus on chocolate blood agar produced a pure growth of colonies resembling Haemophilus spp within 24 hours. However, the isolate was identified on API 20 NE (Bio-Merieux Ltd) as Pasteurella multocida.

Discussion

Pasteurelloïd meningitis is uncommon. Cases of P multocida meningitis have occurred following animal bites, scratches, and other animal contact. The organism has also been known to be transmitted through animal saliva without a bite having occurred. In some cases of infection, no known animal contact has been determined. Meningitis caused by this agent has also been reported following spread of the bacterium from infected wounds after cranio-facial surgery. A few cases have occurred in neonates after infection related to maternal carriage of the organism in the genital tract.

The subjects in whom P multocida meningitis most often occurs are at the extremes of age, being either elderly people or young infants. The typical case involves infants under the age of one year with a history of animal exposure, and cases in adults are unusual. Kumar et al, in a review of cases, found that 40% occurred in infants under one year. When post-traumatic and post-surgical cases were eliminated, 70% of adult cases occurred in people over 55 years of age.

Mortality in P multocida meningitis is high. In the series by Kumar overall mortality was 30%, but was higher in the elderly—63% in patients over 60 years in age. In another series...
of 17 cases, seven of whom were adults, six patients died within 72 hours of hospital admission. Four of these six fatalities involved persons over 60 years of age.¹

Diagnosis of this agent can be difficult, in that Gram staining of CSF will reveal a Gram negative coccobacillus. This results in the organism being confused with more common agents of meningitis such as *N meningitidis* and *H influenzae*. However, identification of *P multocida* is normally straightforward, although false positive antigen testing with latex particle agglutination tests has been reported.³

In conclusion, we have presented a case of meningitis caused by *P multocida*, causing a sudden death in the community. The subject was an adult with no evidence of recent animal bite or chronic debility, but who lived in squalor with obvious animal contamination of his environment. Cases such as this appear to be unusual. However, the high frequency of animal contacts and the relative rarity of such infections must indicate that the risk is low. The majority of infections are wound infections related to animal bites. *P multocida* meningitis is rare, particularly in the adult. However, it is a very serious condition with a high mortality. Therefore, where meningitis occurs in addition to a history of animal exposure, *P multocida* infection should be considered.

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Prevalence of HIV and hepatitis C markers among a cadaveric population in Milan

Cattaneo et al report the interesting finding of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection in individuals lacking risk behaviour. With any postmortem sample, serological false positivity is a well known phenomenon,¹ and in the above instance in particular, confirmatory testing is important for confidence in test results. Although concordance in different screening assays is an excellent predictor for true positivity with any antemortem blood samples, the same may not be true for postmortem samples, where false positivity as a result of unsuitability of analyte can occur with more than one assay. When a single screening test is used, confirmation is especially important.

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The authors reply

We thank Drs Barbara, Galea, and Warwick for their letter concerning our article on testing specimens from cadavers for markers of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and hepatitis C infection. The points they raise are all covered in the article, but are worth emphasising.

We are well aware that false positive serological reactions can occur with postmortem samples and commented on this in the discussion section; it was for this reason that data for hepatitis B serology were not included.

We agree that confirmation testing is especially important and were pleased with the concordance of the postmortem results for HIV testing between the enzyme linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) and agglutination methods, and between the postmortem and (where known) antemortem findings.

Our article emphasises that in the subjects studied, lack of risk behaviour does not mean that there was necessarily no risk behaviour—just that it was not common knowledge and was unknown to the pathologist carrying out the necropsy.

The main point of our paper was that medicolegal practice deals with a particular and selected population that has a high prevalence of markers for HIV and hepatitis C infection, irrespective of known risk behaviour, and in many cases a rapid and easily performed screening test would give early warning of a potential problem.
regard statistics as a form of codified
guesswork and, at worst, a tool to increase
the chance of publication of data beyond a p
value of 0.05. It is a challenge to write for
such a partitioned readership and Jones and
Payne have, quite rightly, tended to serve the
needs of the less numerate majority.

This book is well laid out with the use of
highlighted sections and abundant graphical
illustrations. There are few formulae with
which to grapple and the text is mainly a nar-
rative account of the statistical manipulations
and the reasons behind them. This is leavened
with a sprinkling of biographical snippets.

Overall, this is not a “how to do it” text but
rather it explains why things are done that
way. The volume is relatively slim, there are
less than 190 pages of figures and text and
this has led to a rather steep rate of ascent in
the introductory section. However, for a
readership that has a medical background
and has endured formal attempts by statisti-
cians to justify their stewardship of the Holy
Grail, this text is to be recommended. Those
undertaking research projects that require
detailed statistical interpretation may then
move on to more applied texts such as
Altman’s Practical Statistics for Medical Re-
search (Chapman and Hall, London 1991,
ISBN 0 412 27630 5). However, many may
not make this progression and an acquaint-
ance with the contents of Clinical Investiga-
tion and Statistics in Laboratory Medicine
would, nevertheless, be a major advantage.

WILLIAM R ROCHE

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